



A divisive political rhetoric ensures that even a final resting place becomes contested ground.

## 8 GRAVE POLITICS

The first burial I ever saw was in my grandmother's garden in Lucknow. I was a small child, upset at the destruction of a plastic parrot. Because it was shaped like a living creature, I felt it had 'died'. Death requires solemn ritual, so my brother and cousins buried the broken 'bird'.

Grandma had an affinity for soil. Despite the limitations of a city garden, she grew papayas, ladies' fingers, lemons, herbs, flowers. She also had a keen sense of her own end. In preparation, she had bought herself a *kafan* (shroud), set aside money for her burial and let her family know, so nobody could say that she owed anyone anything after she was gone.

I don't worry much about funeral expenses. Perhaps this is because I have been financially independent long enough not to care about proving it beyond the grave. Still, I inherited from Grandma a certain preoccupation with burial. I wrote one novella set in a graveyard. I gravitate towards Urdu couplets that use burials, funereal baths and biers as metaphor. I visit tombs, cenotaphs, necropolises, pausing to read names and epitaphs. Dutch, Armenian, English, Scottish, French: wherever they came from, here they rest.

When we last visited one of our ancestral villages, Karhan, one of my mother's cousins pointed out the spot where my great-grandfather lies buried, and said, 'You all should put up a stone with his name on it. Our generation is the last one that remembers who is buried where.'

I felt myself bristle, then heard myself declare that I would pay for the stone and the engraving if nobody else would. It was

a curious reaction. I had been arguing at the time with my mother, telling her not to waste money on building inside our ancestral house. We visited so rarely, what was the point? Yet there I was, offering to spend money on a gravestone. Is this what they call, 'the call of blood'?

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Home is where others come looking for you, in life and after. Those who come looking are most often your own blood, but sometimes you also return to those with whom you have a spiritual bond. Sometimes, it is the returning that cements the bond.

Among Shias, the burial sites of Hazrat Ali, his son Hussain and other Imams are treated as sites of pilgrimage. But most do not go that far. They go to the nearest *imambara*, which houses symbolic replicas and is where ritual mourning is enacted year upon year. In returning to their native place, families also return to small *imambaras* in the village, and even within the walls of the household.

My mother returned to the village in staccato. In Moharram, she sews a velvet *chādar*, or coverlet, edged with silver or gold lace, for the tomb of a Sufi called Mir Shamsi in Karhan. Our family draws its lineage from him.

In Sufi thought, death is a sort of homecoming. A verse attributed to al-Ghazali compares the body to a cage and the spirit to a bird that has flown: 'I praise God who hath set me free / and made for me a dwelling in the heavenly heights'.<sup>1</sup> In the Indian subcontinent, Madho Lal Hussein wrote: 'Come home, the grave calls you.'<sup>2</sup> The death anniversary of Sufis is celebrated rather than birth because, as Rumi said: 'The grave is a curtain hiding the communion of paradise.' Their graves, and sites where relics are preserved, get visitors from all communities, and offerings include flowers, incense and decorative *chādars*. The saints are remembered as much for their attitude to power – many lived in poverty and rejected an exclusionary orthodoxy – as for their spiritual practice. Some visitors come hoping for divine

intercession via those who were assumed to have access to God. Some seek cures and amulets. Many come merely to visit, as you would go to an elder or a teacher.

Even when graves are not linked with saints, they are reminders of the next world, and are therefore treated with respect. Any violation is experienced as an insult, and is often intended as such. Whenever graves associated with a minority are targeted, it is that community's right to live that is under attack. In India, in 2002, during the anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat, the tomb of Wali Dakhani was destroyed.<sup>3</sup> He was not a saint but a poet who had written high praise about the state of Gujarat. The violence ended but no attempt was made to restore the grave. A road was built over it. There was nothing left by way of memorial – not a plaque, not a note of regret.

Travelling through Gujarat in 2006, I had noticed the cab driver's reluctance to drive me to cemeteries. He could not distinguish between Dutch and English cemeteries and Muslim ones. The word he used for all was *makkarba* (*maqbara* or 'tomb'), and when I persisted, he told me to go ask Muslim shopkeepers because 'Ye Miya log ki jagah Miya hi jaante hain', 'Only Muslims know about Muslim places'. In his eyes, a cemetery was not a reminder of the other place, where all of us eventually go, but *the other's* place. Therefore, unworthy of visitation.

Mundane, everyday symbols of Muslim lives – food, clothing, prayers – have been targeted before, but in recent years, there is a hostile focus on graveyards. A singer of Bhojpuri songs shot into the national headlines spouting lyrics like 'Jo na bole Jai Shree Ram / Usko Bhejo Kabristan', 'Those who don't hail Lord Ram must be sent to the graveyard'.<sup>4</sup> It was an obvious incitement to violence and the singer was booked. However, politicians, too, have been dividing people via burial sites.

Prime Minister Modi himself campaigned in Uttar Pradesh saying, 'If you create a *kabristaan* (graveyard) in a village, then a *shamshaan* (cremation ground) should also be created.'<sup>5</sup> The current chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, asked voters to send rival parties to the *kabristān*, a word picked out

carefully to suggest that his rivals were allied with minorities, from whom he was distancing himself.<sup>6</sup> In fact, he specifically warned that if his party was not elected, state resources would be used up to create mosques and graveyards.<sup>7</sup>

Graves are not Muslim. Nor Christian, nor Jewish. Nor is cremation Hindu. Pagan religions typically had both cremation and burial traditions. A grave was merely proof of life, a record of existence and loss. Among the oldest surviving human artefacts in India are megaliths and dolmens, indicating burial.<sup>8</sup> Cairns, or rock burials, have been found.<sup>9</sup>

Ancient Harappans and Aryans were familiar with burials. The Rig Veda, composed between 1700 BCE and 1100 BCE, refers to a *kurgan*, a roofed burial chamber supported by posts, and horse sacrifices were part of royal funerals.<sup>10</sup> There is mention of both cremation and burial, with verses emphasising ‘the softness and gentleness of the welcoming earth, both mother and bride, which lies lightly on the dead man’.

Over time, cremation became the norm for caste Hindus, but India’s remarkable heterodoxy means a great variety of death rites. Dalits, outside the caste hierarchy, often bury the dead. In *Death in Banaras*, Jonathan Parry has described other categories of burials within the Hindu fold: children, lepers, the childless, and ascetics who are considered to have left the material world while still alive.<sup>11</sup>

In Kolkata, there are at least three Hindu graveyards, and reporters have noted that people leave objects like cloth, candles, slippers, even medicine, while some children are buried with things they liked to eat.<sup>12</sup> A burial ground in Bengaluru has tombstones and epitaphs with sculptures of the sacred Nandi bull and lings to denote the worship of Lord Shiva.<sup>13</sup> The Lingayat community buries the dead in a sitting position.<sup>14</sup> Other south Indian communities that bury the dead include the Vokkaligas, Kurubas, Reddys, Pisharody, certain Gond clans, the Kodavas.<sup>15</sup>

In Mumbai, there’s a graveyard in the heart of town that belongs to the Dashnami Goswami community, a monastic group that buries the dead after rubbing the body down with ash, dressing it in saffron robes, a *rudraksh* (prayer bead seed)

necklace and a bag to represent ascetic antecedents. The Sahi were another Hindu group that buried the dead recumbent while the Vani buried in the seated, *padmasana* position.<sup>16</sup> Followers of the Pranami faith also buried the dead.<sup>17</sup> In Rajasthan, burials were documented<sup>18</sup> among the Kalbeliya Mewara, Tonwar Rajput, Kaamad of the Alakh panth, Meghwals who follow Guru Ramdeo-ji, the Siddh who follow Jasnath-ji, the Khaaradia Sirvis, followers of the saint Aiji,<sup>19</sup> and the Kathodi.<sup>20</sup>

The Garāsiya community I spoke with in Sirohi also confirmed that while ordinary tribesmen are cremated, never the Bhopa or priest. He is always buried. Another ascetic group, the Nath Jogis were traditionally buried. The Jogis could identify as Hindu or Muslim, or neither.<sup>21</sup> Yogi Adityanath, who belongs to this order, should know better than to complain about graveyards.

Perhaps he does know better. However, most people don't. Growing up with a singular narrative of Hinduism, I too had internalised the burial-cremation binary. There was nothing in my education, in literature or popular culture that smashed this false binary. Every Hindu character that died on screen was cremated. Children were rarely shown being buried or immersed in rivers, as is the actual practice. The only visible and remarked-upon Hindu burials were those of political leaders who consciously rejected upper-caste practices, as some did in south India.

Dalits form over 16 per cent of India's population and have traditionally been required to perform labours that nobody else would – handling sewage, animal and human waste, corpses – and were often forced to live on the fringes of the village; the community has limited access to the performance of death rites. There are reports of Dalits being turned away from crematoria, or having to perform rites at home.<sup>22</sup> Access to a crematorium can be blocked, and videos have surfaced of Dalits having to airdrop a body from a bridge to ground level to avoid the 'upper caste area'.<sup>23</sup>

Discrimination does not end with death, nor with religious conversion. In Christian graveyards, too, especially where the

land is owned by individuals, there is evidence of segregation: Dalits buried on one side of a wall, upper-caste converts on the other side.<sup>24</sup> Activists identifying as Pasmanda or lower-caste Muslims have also flagged the issue of denial of burial rights on lands controlled by the Muslim elite.<sup>25</sup>

Dalits and Muslims also complain of graveyards being taken over for other purposes. Not all graveyards are public land. Most are private properties declared *wakf*, that is, land or buildings donated by Muslims for the welfare of the community and managed by a board. In Delhi, a 1970 document noted the existence of 488 Muslim graveyards, and yet, only twenty-five to thirty of these could be used for their intended purpose.<sup>26</sup>

Attempts to take over burial lands have led to lawsuits, fights, even murder. Journalist Saeed Naqvi mentions covering a 'riot' in Gopalgarh, Rajasthan, where police entered a mosque and shot dead six Muslims in 2011. At the heart of the violence was a set of three properties – a mosque, a two-acre enclosure for special Eid prayers, and a graveyard that had been encroached.<sup>27</sup>

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When someone dies, Muslims are taught to say *Inna ilahi wa inna ilahi rajioon*. From God we come and to God we return. Parry writes that informed Hindu priests also describe a hierarchy of liberation: *salokya* (residence in the same world of God), *samipya* (living in proximity to God), *sarupya* (acquiring the form of God) and, the highest, *sayujya* (complete union with God 'as water mixes with water').<sup>28</sup> This is not very different from Sufi or Christian ideas of the soul's return to God, who is the ultimate home.

I know neither Arabic nor Sanskrit, but sometimes I develop a feeling for earth like marrow in my bones. I feel an attachment for the Hindi word: *mitti*. Soil. The shell, garment, cage of the body is dust. Or ash. Those who cremate also need rituals connected with nature – water, if not land. Ashes are floated in rivers. Some people ask for ashes to be scattered in a place where they felt most alive. The soul may or may not be liberated, but we all

want to return to the elements in some tangible form. Some of us actively seek out the elements when we want to exit this world.

A boatman in Banaras once told me that he was afraid I was going to kill myself. I was on assignment in a city that draws millions of tourists and is renowned for its silk trade, but where weavers were starving. In the evening, I'd hired a boat on the Ganga. The boatman was a nervous greying figure, perhaps wondering if he was morally bound to try and rescue me. It was only after I took an oar and demanded that he teach me to row that he was persuaded, I wasn't seeking a watery grave.

What made him think such a thing? He shrugged. People come here to die, he said. That I insisted on being his sole passenger, and was dressed in a white saree that made me look like a young Hindu widow, didn't help.

Very few drown themselves, but it is true that people come here to die. Banaras, also called Varanasi or Kashi, has been seen as a place of salvation for as long as anyone can remember. Ancient Sanskrit texts proclaimed: 'Those whose bones, hair, nails, and flesh fall in Kashi will reside in heaven even though they be great sinners.' Funeral pyres burn day and night on the banks of the river. Millions come, hoping for *mukti*, liberation. But, as Jonathan Parry writes, 'The problem starts as soon as one enquires what death in Kashi is a liberation *from*.'<sup>29</sup>

The range of responses to this question is extremely wide. The commonest is that it is a 'cessation of coming and going' - that is, the end of rebirth. The popular view of what liberation means was that it is 'a perpetual and sybaritic residence in heaven'. One of Parry's informants described it as a place where a *rasgulla* (sweet) would be magically conjured if you wanted one. Another described it as the antithesis of *this* world. Heaven, then, is an idealised homeland: a place of fulfilment, where you never feel thwarted, where evil is barred. A safe place.

Hell is the opposite, a slightly exaggerated version of the evils that befall us. A place where tortures never cease, and full of others like ourselves.

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I once read an obituary of a homeless man, a rickshaw puller called Mohammed Abdul Kasim Ali Shaikh, who had lived briefly in a shelter in Delhi.<sup>30</sup>

This brief shelter brought him in contact with activists; that's how there was an article telling us about his life – that he was a survivor of childhood abuse, was HIV positive, was not bitter but friendly, that he worked for his daily bread till the day he died, that he was killed in an accident while he slept on the road divider. The writer, Harsh Mander, posed a question: 'Homeless and destitute. Leaving no trace behind him that he had ever lived. Was his life and death indeed of no consequence?'

The question stopped me. Leaving no trace, are our lives of consequence? The question can be tweaked: if we are not allowed to leave some trace of our existence, are we being informed that we are inconsequential?

Graves of prominent men and soldiers' memorials are sites of public memory and are maintained as such to assert consequence. Governments, armies, city and village councils determine who has a right to be remembered. Groups with less power are denied memorial space, and thereby, their claims upon the land are further weakened.

In an article about the discovery of a mass grave in New York in 1991, Edward Rothstein wrote that cemeteries are the locus of tribute and memory, affirming connections to a place. Old maps had confirmed the existence of a 'Negro Burial Ground' and this transformed New York's understanding of its history. 'Among the scars left by the heritage of slavery, one of the greatest is an absence: where are the memorials, cemeteries, architectural structures or sturdy sanctuaries that typically provide the ground for a people's memory?'<sup>31</sup>

Disadvantaged groups, like Dalits and Adivasis in India, have fewer visible memorials with which they might identify. Statues of Dalit icons like Dr Ambedkar, who led the team drafting the Constitution of India, have been defaced. The commemoration of an 1818 battle in which Dalit soldiers of the

Mahar regiment routed the Maratha forces led by Brahmin Peshwas, has become contentious again in recent years. A board marking the grave of a Mahar (Dalit) leader was damaged in 2017, and then went missing, which led to tensions and clashes with other groups.

Many striking monuments in India relate to mausoleums of Muslim rulers and nobles, including the Taj Mahal in Agra. The Supreme Court has already remarked on state neglect causing the latter's deterioration, while Hindu groups have been trying to make the case that it used to be a temple, and have conducted Hindu rituals in its vicinity.<sup>32</sup> In Maharashtra, there have been attempts to destroy the tomb of a Muslim soldier who was killed whilst trying to kill Shivaji, a seventeenth-century king who has been appropriated as a mascot of Hindutva groups.<sup>33</sup>

An octogenarian writer, Govind Pansare, who tried to bring historical context to local politics by writing a book called *Shivaji Kon Hota? (Who Was Shivaji?)*, detailing the ruler's life and his largely secular and diverse administration, was assassinated in 2015. The state has not honoured his memory or his work through any memorials.

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There is a poet called Rahat Indori, from the city of Indore. Urdu poets have often taken on noms de plume with a city name as a suffix. Nearly every town in the Hindi-speaking belt can boast its own poet, whether in residence or in exile. For instance, Daag Dehlavi of Delhi, Kaifi Azmi of Azamgarh, Shamim Karhani of Karhan.

One of Rahat Indori's couplets is often quoted, and when he recites it at public events, he never fails to draw cries of approval and applause:

*Sabhi ka khoon hai shaamil yahaan ki mitti mein  
Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai!*

Everybody's blood is mixed into the earth here,  
Hindustan does not belong to anybody's father!

The verse has the ring of a double truth: people of all races and faiths have given their blood to the land. Like it or not, anybody who is buried here, belongs here. It fills me with sadness, though, to hear the other truth: the couplet is a riposte to people who imply that some of us do not belong in this land, that some people are indeed acting as if the country was their personal property.

When I begin to despair, I think of Chaman/Rizwan. The newspaper had carried a story about a 'mentally challenged' youth who succeeded in uniting two communities.<sup>34</sup> The boy was born into a Hindu household, but wandered off and got lost before he was adopted by a Muslim family. His mother found him and brought him back, but he kept disappearing, going back to his other family. When he died, the families initially squabbled about whether his body should be burnt or buried. Finally, a golden balance was achieved: he was buried, like a child, in the Hindu cremation ground, with priests reading verses from both the Quran and the Gita.

Sometimes, I tell myself, Hindustan is where anything is possible. Kabir was possible only in Kashi, after all.

Weaver-saint-poet Kabir, born into or adopted by a Muslim family, devoted himself to a Hindu guru who would not embrace him. He was eventually acknowledged as a spiritual force who distanced himself from all orthodoxies. True, he was pressured into leaving Kashi. Towards the end of his life, he went to Magahar, a place where priests said salvation was impossible. It is also said that when he died, there was a squabble about last rites – burial or cremation? The matter was resolved through a miracle. Lifting the shroud, his followers found not a body but a bunch of flowers. People were free to divide these remnants and perform any ritual they chose.

That Kabir, and his poetry, survived and that his fame only grew in the centuries after his death is another miracle. Kashi, the city that disowned him, is forever linked with his name, and even though we do not know if he was buried, there is

a 'tomb' – or shrine, if you prefer – that we can visit by way of remembrance.<sup>35</sup>

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What is this need to put name on mud? But I *am* tempted. I want an epitaph. Perhaps it is the same feeling that made me scratch my name on the rocks of the hills of my childhood. An epitaph, like a name-plate on the door of a rented apartment. Some words to stave off fears of amnesia and isolation. While we sleep the eternal sleep, suppose someone should miss us, they should know where to come find us.

They say all children long to be seen. Don't all grown-ups long for it too: to be seen, to not be forgotten the moment your back is turned? Is choosing to go into the earth and writing your name on a stone also not a way of sending down roots?

Sometimes I wonder if I should set aside money for the purpose. My poor grandmother probably didn't know that it isn't just shrouds and funerals that cost money. Finding a spot in a graveyard costs money these days. Besides, there is the question of where: which corner of the world would I choose, if I could choose?

In India, we make a distinction between *janm-bhoomi*, birth-place, and *karm-bhoomi*, a place of work or purpose. Mumbai has been my *karm-bhoomi*. So have other cities, for one must go wherever one finds bread. However, whenever I find myself in the grip of anxiety or sadness, I shut my eyes and try to conjure a place of safety, a place where I can go as I am. What I see is a cluster of graves.

The memory of my maternal grandparents intercedes in my struggle to find a way to belong somewhere. Grandma rarely expressed any material desires, but she did say that she wanted to be buried next to her husband. She died in another city but, in keeping with her wishes, we brought her body to Lucknow and buried her near my grandfather. A great-grandmother, other great-aunts and uncles are also buried in the vicinity. I visit those graves,

touch the grass that sprouts atop, and mourn afresh their loss, the ideals they tried to live up to. When I cannot visit, I think of them, and make plans to visit whenever I can.

There is no longer any adolescent drama, but I did buy a tiny bit of land to call my own. Not my mother's, not my father's. Mine. When it came to deciding where, I chose Lucknow. The city is tied up with the happier memories of my childhood. It may change yet – people, accents, the names of parks or markets, its particular cosmopolitanism may be lost. But there's this: at least two people who loved me without condition lie buried here.

Questions of belonging trouble me very little now. When people ask where home is, I now have an answer.

